

On Teaching South Indian Music

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IN PRESENTING my thoughts on the problem of how to evolve a reasonably good method of teaching *south* Indian classical music, I feel I should begin by expressing my broad agreement with what has been said in the excellent keynote paper of this collection, although of course it is principally concerned with *north* Indian classical music. The most significant point made by its author Jayasri Banerjee I believe is about the unfortunate lack of homology between theory and practice in our classical music, which has undoubtedly infected our teaching method as well, be it concerned with north Indian or Carnatic music. In most cases, theory and practice have not helped each other. More often than not, theory becomes 'grand' theory, from which the practising musician can hardly draw a helpful guideline, while the performing musician on his part generally works in the light of his empirical experience, unmindful of the need to present his music on the basis of conscious formulations. It's time we drew the lessons that can be drawn from this situation in our attempt to build up a viable method of teaching our classical music. This of course is a task that requires the attention of many of our musicians and music teachers and calls for wide-spread debate and exchange of ideas. I give below, as preliminary material for this debate, some observations that are based upon my experience in teaching Carnatic music.

As is well known, the teaching and learning of Carnatic music in its initial stage is based upon elements of a pedagogical system provided by Purandara Dasa who had abstracted the seven *tālas* (that are in vogue today in Carnatic music) from the ancient *Sālagā Sūḍa* Prabandhas and composed certain basic exercises and simple songs for the teachers and students of Carnatic music to work with. The teaching commences with *rāga Māyāmālavagaula* (equivalent to *rāga Bhairav* of the north Indian system). Although some teachers begin with exercises set to the *Mela-rāga Sankaravarana* (equivalent to the *Bilāwal Thāt* of north India) or a few other *Melas*, the common practice is to begin with *Māyāmālavagaula*.

These exercises do not pose many problems. The first real

problem that a teacher faces is when he prepares his more advanced lessons for initiating the student into the domain of extemporaneous music. This is so because the student is now exposed to the complexity of Carnatic music, which is essentially a reflection of the subtleties of the Gamaka system, related to the role of Swara-ornamentation in the delicate and sensitive rendering of a rāga.

It will be agreed that seen from the view-point of Swara-embellishment Indian music appears to be a very complex system. And of the two main systems of Indian classical music, the system of Carnatic music is the more complex one. Let me not be misunderstood. I myself happen to be an ardent lover of north Indian classical music, the essential beauty of which is almost beyond comparison. It is however characterized more by a certain purity of note (the fret-note or the key-note) in the sense that when Gamaka is applied here, it is applied from the note above, resulting in the predominance of the Ullasita-gamaka with the help of the glide or the Mīr. Carnatic music on the other hand is characterized more or less by the use of the Swaras in their non-fret positions, that is, their embellished positions. Not that the pure notes are not used in Carnatic music; but the Swaras in most of the rāgas here amount to ranges rather than pitches. The profuse use of Gamakas like Tiripa, Vali, Kurula, etc. in both the Orayika and Odaginpu varieties, Āhata in both the varieties of Rava and Khandimpu, or Kampita, Mudrita, Humphita, Misrita, etc. endows Carnatic music with the essential character that it possesses. (Many of the rest like Lina, Plāvita, Ullasita, Tribhinna, etc. used in stringed instruments are of course common to both the systems of music).

The complexity of south Indian music with regard to its embellishment of notes that I have been speaking of is doubtless a reflection of the way in which the contours of the Swaras are grasped here in contrast to the way the bounds of the notes are understood in north Indian music. This complexity naturally leaves its mark on the south Indian rāgas themselves, complicating the modes of teaching adopted here and impairing their objectivity. While it must be conceded that it is this flexibility of teaching method which has resulted in the emergence of a variety of styles in Carnatic music, it must be equally conceded that this has also been responsible for a certain lack of uniformity that can lead one to say that a particular method is the correct one and should be followed by a music teacher. It is of course true that most of our musicians and music teachers are tempted to follow what a famous musician does in teaching his student. Most of us are captivated by the adage 'Mahākavi Prayōgāt Sādhuh' even though this famous

musician, not always a purist, might leave the mark of his idiosyncrasies upon his music and music teaching. This of course is a dangerous practice and is often the source of the perpetration of wrong methods in the teaching and learning process. The remedy doubtless lies in our conscious effort to formulate and express the real values of our classical music, which are not merely a matter of dexterity but essentially a matter of in-depth grasp.

Let me now consider some of the methods and practices of teaching Carnatic music. Thus, for example, while doing the fundamental exercises, the common method adopted is to teach the notes of a particular rāga in their fret positions. I feel that when the student is eventually led into the complexity of the Swara-system of Carnatic music, the notes in the exercises should be taught in the very beginning with their appropriate Gamakas in accordance with the demands of a given rāga. Naturally these exercises may be extended to tackling some other rāgas to familiarize the student with all the notes of the chromatic scale along with their graces; this will help the student grasp the characters of the different Swaras. A common objection to this suggestion will be that in a class consisting of several students whose sense of pitch is not equally developed it is pointless to teach them the Gamaka. But from my experience I may say that the results are often quite good. I have found that some who could not at first hold the correct pitches of the blunt notes could later hold the notes in Gamaka. This of course is something which would not objectively hold good for each and every student.

I may add in passing that I had heard my elders in the profession doing Ākāra-sādhana on the blunt notes. I am sad to say that this did not get them anywhere. Understandably so, for the contours of Carnatic music with all its circlings, twists, leaps, jumps, pulls, glides, swings, etc. cannot be arrived at by Ākār practice. Such things might be helpful if and when one wishes to achieve a high speed in his practice of Swara-succession with Gamaka.

I now refer to the practice of learning music by imitating the teacher. This is a well-established principle of our teaching methodology and has been at the back of the emergence of different styles in our music. But only reasonably talented music students can prosper from this method—and those mostly by hard practice undertaken often unthinkingly. As a Vina-player as well as a vocalist, I have however come to observe that the teaching and learning of instrumental music demand more effort than the teaching and learning of vocal music, in the sense that while vocal music can be learnt largely by imitating the teacher, this is not so in the

case of instrumental music in which the fingering techniques may well vary from person to person. In this connection, let me add that despite all its limitations, our traditional Gurukula system of music education has a sterling merit in its very personal method of music teaching. There is no reason why we should not be able to preserve this aspect of our music education even in our modern-day classroom teaching, provided of course we have sufficient resources to ensure a very low teacher-student ratio, without which it will not be possible for the teachers to devote sufficient attention to the needs of each individual student. There are many problems in our music-education system that can be sorted out by deploying sufficient resources and imaginative planning. □